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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Moscow and the French Crisis

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№ 43

7 June 1968
No. 0023/68A

Approved For Release 2006/12/27 : CIA-RDP79-00927A006500010002-0

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MOSCOW AND THE FRENCH CRISIS

The Soviet Union sees in France a situation over which it has no control and from which it probably can hope to gain only if the Communists come to share power in a stable popular front government. For the Soviets, the turbulent events of recent weeks in France have been the unpredictable kind they do not welcome, and about which they still are uneasy. The course Moscow steers in the days ahead will be determined largely by De Gaulle's moves. It most probably will be calculated to leave room for maneuver, but to back the French Communist Party (FCP) as much as possible without exposing the party to accusations of being a Soviet agent.

Soviet Reaction to the Crisis

The USSR was taken by surprise, and its reaction to the fast-breaking French crisis tended to lag behind events. In its public statements, as events unfolded, Moscow was at pains to stay in step with FCP positions while avoiding direct criticism of De Gaulle. The statements made it evident that Moscow was clearly behind a parliamentary rather than a revolutionary solution, and that Moscow wanted to avoid giving cause for any charges that it was meddling in French affairs.

The Soviet press assailed the supporters of radical change and backed the FCP's call for a united front with all forces favoring democratic reform. In Moscow's first authoritative commentary on the crisis, Yuri Zhukov, Pravda's senior political observer, scored "ultraleftist, anarchist ideas, often echoing those of Mao Tse-tung," which can "cause confusion and disorient ardent but politically inexperienced young people...and turn those who fall under their influence into blind tools of provocation." Moscow praised French workers for having maintained order and "proved their maturity for a wider participation in the country's affairs."

Only after De Gaulle dissolved the national assembly, called for elections, marshaled his military units, and warned against "totalitarian Communism" did Moscow's commentary grow more critical. Even then, the Russian press attacked only the Gaullist regime's internal policies, and continued to take to task the "long-haired youths and black flags of anarchy." Soviet statements repeatedly have betrayed distress over the early seizure of political initiative by unruly student radicals unresponsive to Communist control. Moscow evidently has been worried that the boldness of the youthful activists might,

on the one hand, prompt defections from Communist ranks while, on the other, it could precipitate a military take-over to impose order.

Franco-Soviet Cooperation

In terms of international politics, Russia's comparatively recent rapprochement with France under De Gaulle has been for Moscow more a matter of form than of substance. Bilateral cooperation with Paris has been highlighted by the pomp and ceremony of state visits, but practical results have been limited and have been largely confined to scientific and space research projects.

The most ambitious Franco-Soviet space venture, Project Roseau, is to use a Soviet booster to orbit a 600-pound French satellite in the early 1970s. Late last year, the two countries conducted their first joint space project in the launching of two research rockets carrying French payloads. Plans reportedly call for French equipment to be included on a Soviet lunar probe this year or next, and possibly on a future Venus probe as well.

The French are also building what is to be the world's largest hydrogen bubble chamber, a specialized component for high-energy physics research at the giant Soviet accelerator at Serpukhov. Other bilateral scientific endeavors encompass research projects in oceanography, biology, agriculture, and television transmission.

The much-publicized Franco-Soviet military "cooperation" has grown to include exchanges of visits by VIPs, ships, students, instructors, and sports teams, as well as information on military medicine, but has been of marginal value. Trade between the two countries last year amounted to $340 million, up from $245 million the previous year, but it still represents no more than two percent of the total trade of either country. Prospects are good for further increases in French exports of machinery, although France probably cannot absorb many more of the USSR's primary products, which often are available elsewhere on better terms.

Moscow has publicized the similarity of French and Soviet views on some major international issues, and has tried to foster the notion that better Franco-Russian relations can enhance the prospect of new security arrangements for all Europe. This has cost the Soviets little, and they have undoubtedly been pleased to see De Gaulle's divisive moves in NATO highlight disagreements within the Western Alliance.

It has been another matter, however, to find in De Gaulle's moves the prospect of fulfilling Moscow's long-term strategic objectives in Europe. Soviet interests there obviously are much broader than the establishment of a bilateral relationship with France, and Moscow has no illusion that essential problems of European security--the German question in

particular--could be settled without reference to the US.

Moscow and Paris View The German Question

Ironically, the same factor that has precluded a Franco-Soviet pact that would upset the equilibrium in Europe was also the prime mover of Soviet rapprochement with France: fear of a Europe under German domination. There could scarcely be any other raison d'etre for a full-fledged alliance between them, yet they have not been able to act jointly on the fundamental issue of the status of Germany.

Russia's and France's German policies, although similar in motivation and strategic objective, are, in important respects, tactically divergent. Both accept the Oder and Neisse rivers as the permanent boundary between East Germany and Poland. Both firmly oppose West German access to nuclear weapons and fear a strong bilateral alliance between Washington and Bonn. In its praise for De Gaulle's position on the border question, however, Moscow plays down his linking of a final border settlement to some form of German reunification. Moscow maintains the oft-repeated doctrine that reunification is a matter to be left to the "two German states," and De Gaulle has refused to recognize East Germany as a state. Although De Gaulle envisions an eventual elimination of the postwar divisions of Europe, the Soviets stand by the status quo.

Both the Soviet Union and France want to keep the genie of German nationalism in the bottle. Both want somehow to draw West Germany away from the US and the Atlantic Alliance. Their rapport, however, has not brought them appreciably closer to these ends. Moscow, in fact, may have concluded that NATO was moribund anyway, that De Gaulle had already played his cards, and that he had lost any leverage he might have had with which to exert influence on Germany and the Atlantic Alliance.

The Soviets have helped give De Gaulle the significance he sought as the West's champion of detente, but they probably have never been confident that in pursuing his expressed desire to build a bridge in their direction, he was willing to burn others behind him. The Russians were not likely to place great faith in De Gaulle unless he proved himself on the subject of prime interest to them--for example, with a direct move that would constitute de facto recognition of East Germany and thus undercut Bonn's most cherished foreign policy position. This has not come about and is not in prospect.

De Gaulle undeniably has been of use to the Soviets in their effort to foster the notion on the continent that NATO is an obsolescent arrangement, that North America is a diminishing factor in the European equation, and that if there is to be a settlement of Europe's problems, dealings with Moscow are not only inescapable, but also safe and even desirable. Thus, the Soviets have profited from their relationship with De Gaulle, without investing a great deal.

It is unlikely that Moscow overestimated his value, or that it has had more than a limited interest in him as a mediator. Russia recognizes that the US is the real power, and would prefer to deal directly with Washington. Moscow has used its dialogue with De Gaulle chiefly as a means of probing the possibilities presented by disunity in NATO, and for exploiting the impatience of the West European public with the East-West deadlock. If De Gaulle weathers the storm, he is likely to be weaker and less inclined to attempt dramatic diplomatic initiatives. With his standing and France's leverage in international affairs thus diminished, the Soviets may find even his earlier limited value to them drastically lessened.

The USSR and the French Communist Party

The Soviets thus would prefer a successor government in Paris that would include the FCP, but it is moot whether or not Moscow could expect any dramatic gains for its foreign policy to flow from such a development. Moscow does not own the FCP, and domestic political considerations probably would preclude the French Communists from appearing subservient to the Soviet Union.

Moscow, of course, would have more influence with the FCP than with any other French political party and could be expected to use it to encourage French policies more in its favor. The Soviets would like France to sign the nonproliferation treaty (NPT), for example, as well as to steer a more neutral course in world affairs and to oppose efforts to revitalize the Western Alliance or to strengthen the Common Market.

The FCP has strong ties with Moscow and takes a foreign policy line that is much to Moscow's liking. It favors French withdrawal from the Atlantic Alliance in 1969. It prefers "all European" cooperation rather than the Common Market, and could at least be expected to work for Communist representation in EEC institutions.

FCP positions on disarmament questions are especially far-reaching. The party endorses not only participation in the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee and the signing of the NPT, but a complete nuclear test ban, European denuclearized zones, reduction of atomic stockpiles, elimination of "military blocs," and dissolution of the French force de frappe. The FCP would almost certainly move to divert funds from defense to meet the needs of its social programs.

The FCP could count on Soviet backing for a foreign policy platform retaining these features. The FCP's principles are not shared in full with the Federation of the Left, however, with which it figures to share power if a popular front government is formed. Moreover, Federation policy probably would predominate, and would have a moderating effect on FCP positions. The FCP's influence, in fact, would probably be more effective in breaking coalition policies not to its liking than in implementing a line of its own.

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Outlook

If the FCP could assume a role in a popular front government, Moscow would then hope above all that its French comrades could persuade their non-Communist colleagues to be more forthcoming on the German question. It is not at all certain, however, that such a government, preoccupied with pressing problems of domestic reform, would in the foreseeable future be breaking new ground of such magnitude in its foreign policy. And only if Moscow and Paris can act jointly on the German question and bring others with them, would the full consequences of their coming together be felt.

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